

Vermont Project Profile in Truancy and Dropout Prevention

Project Name: Burlington Attendance Project
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Project Objective

To increase school attendance, reduce school truancy and dropouts

Age/Grade/Characteristics of Students Served

All students, grades K-12

School District/Schools Involved

Schools in the Burlington School District

Funding Sources and Sustainability Plan

- United Way of Chittenden County
- City of Burlington
- Children and Family Council for Prevention
- Burlington School District
- Howard Center for Human Services – Baird

Initial year: Collaboration of United Way (\$12,000); City of Burlington (\$10,000), Burlington Schools (\$10,000); and Agency of Human Services/OJJDP grant through the Children and Family Council for Prevention Programs.

Last three years: Children and Family Council for Prevention Programs; Howard Center for Human Services put in about \$30,000 in Medicaid match funding.

Next three years: All funders (except Burlington Schools) becomes Safe Schools-Healthy Students grant.

What services are provided to students? Families? Others?

- School district-wide attendance policy and procedures.
- Letters / contacts made to parents at 5-, 10-, 15- and 20-days of absence (illness, vacation, other). At 15 days, a meeting is held with the school, student and family. At 20 days, the parents/guardian can be referred to court.
- Two attendance social workers work with students, families and school staff on barriers to school attendance.

What are the results to date?

- Systems have changed the way people do business and the way parents and students approach school.
- Cultural change is community wide.
- School attendance has been recognized as a community not a school issue.
- Attendance: There has been a two year drop in absences of 22% (2001-2003)
- Dropout Rate: City dropout rate has almost been cut in half, from 9.8% four years ago to 5.1% in 2001-02; 2003, 4.1%. Of the 52 students served by the attendance social workers between January 1999 and May 2002 – who face the most significant barriers and are considered formal cases in the mental health system – only 14 percent had dropped out. An amazing 65% are still in school. Another 21% have moved to another school district; we are researching whether they are still in school.

What challenges is the program facing?

- Long-term sustainability of social work positions
- How to reach the 16+ age group
- Students who are repeatedly tardy or whom attend school but are not on task and learning. State law only requires school attendance not school progress.

What partnerships has the project developed?

The Burlington Attendance Project involves more than 25 community agencies as well as the city's nine schools. These groups meet monthly to monitor progress and problem-solve. Among the groups involved are:

- Baird Center for Children and Families (community mental health agency)
- Burlington Police Department
- Burlington School-Based Health Centers
- Burlington School District
- Champlain Initiative (regional partnership)
- Chittenden County State's Attorney
- Chittenden County Family Court
- City of Burlington
- Community Justice Center
- Linking Learning to Life (school-to-work nonprofit)
- Lund Family Center
- Spectrum Youth and Family Services
- Vermont Agency of Human Services
- Vermont Department of Corrections, Probation and Parole
- Vermont Department of PATH, Burlington District (social welfare agency)
- Vermont Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, Burlington District (child custody agency)
- United Way of Chittenden County

What can you offer to other communities and schools that are interested in truancy and dropout prevention and intervention?

- Procedures and letters to parents at each step
- Golden Gavel court award for improved attendance
- Brochure summarizing steps to replicate the process

Please briefly share a “case example” that would illustrate how your project addresses truancy and dropout issues.

- High school student who has missed more than 30 days of school is sent to Woodside for a weekend by the Family Court judge. Attendance improved significantly.
- The parent of a high school student who has missed more than 30 days of school is required to accompany the student to and from classes (although not sit in classes). The student did not miss additional days of school that year.
- The parent of elementary students who is dealing with substance use, homelessness, poverty and other risk factors but who is committed to doing the best for her kids is supported by a social worker. Student attendance is stabilized.